

# When churches become concert halls, clubs and cafes



**Highland Views**  
Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

Visiting family in Portland, Oregon, we went out for dinner in a local church that was transformed into a restaurant, bar and night club. The owner greeted us with smiles and invitations to join in the evening's karaoke (only one of us did that, singing a great rendition of "Piano Man"). Learning of so many dying churches across the land, including here in North Carolina, I wonder if this may be the future of once "sacred" buildings. Is "God's House" becoming "The Peoples' House"? Is that such a bad thing?

I've seen many nearly empty churches over the years. Some of these are large, virtually vacant buildings. I always scan the sanctuaries, imagining the good use they could be for community groups and activities. Fresh out of seminary, I inquired about a pastoral po-

sition at an urban church that held church on Sundays while providing the only movie theater in the neighborhood. The space was also offered for nonprofit organizations, classes, dances and neighborhood meetings. I didn't get the position, but was impressed with their openness and vision.

An Associated Press article caught my attention ("In Europe's empty churches, prayer and confessions make way for drinking and dancing," AP, June 22, 2023). "Across Europe, the continent that nurtured Christianity for most of two millennia, churches, convents and chapels stand empty and increasingly derelict as faith and church attendance shriveled over the past half century." One bishop in Antwerp lamented: "That is painful. I will not hide it. On the other hand, there is no return to the past possible."

This was startling, if not surprising to read: "It is a phenomenon seen over much of Europe's Christian heartland from Germany to Italy and many nations in between. It really stands out in Flan-

ders, in northern Belgium, which has some of the greatest cathedrals on the continent and the finest art to fill them. If only it had enough faithful. A 2018 study from the PEW research group showed, in Belgium, that of the 83% that say they were raised Christian, only 55% still consider themselves so. Only 10% of Belgians still attended church regularly." Other than growth in some highly emotional charismatic churches, this seems to be true in America as well. As the number of the faithful dwindles, what will happen to all those empty parishes and pews?

The mayor of a town near Brussels stated: "In my city we have a brewery in a church, we have a hotel in a church, we have a cultural center in a church, we have a library in a church. So we have a lot of new destinations for the churches." He's also involved in "repurposing some 350 churches" across the region. Think of the potential for innovative projects.

One further point of interest was presented in the article: "Even if Roman Catholic religion is on the wane, a sense

of the sacral or a need for reflection is also still present in society, whether one is religious, agnostic or atheist. And the aura of tranquility emanating from a church is hard to match." I agree. A church, synagogue, mosque, temple, can be a peaceful place for contemplation, or simply to rest from the busy, noisy world. Some may feel a connection to God or a higher power; some may feel a connection to others seeking refuge inside; yet others may sense a connection to history, humanity or the natural world inside and out. There are as many reasons to go inside an enclosing, embracing space as there are human beings. So, yes, even atheists can find structures originally intended as "houses of God" tranquil places.

In our chaplaincy work, we often created our own sanctuaries or "sacred spaces." A free dining room, shelter meeting room, jail cafeteria or cell, public park on the grass under shading trees. Most churches were locked anyway, un-

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fortunately presenting a feeling of exclusion to those of us who weren't members. In our view, the people who gathered were the sanctuary, embodying the belief, the idea, that we create safe spaces to "be human" together. Circles were formed where everyone felt welcomed, included, listened to, cared for. Each person was a "member" just by their presence. Even in evangelical days, we understood that a building is not "church," the people are.

Did Jesus, or any religious leader, intend to construct walls, doors, roofs? I highly doubt it (and Jesus was a carpen-

ter). Sure, believers need someplace to gather, to be protected from the weather (and believers of other faiths?), but I would suggest the founders of faith traditions, who were often outsiders surrounded by outsiders, offered instructions for building faith, and perhaps a better world, not building another Box of Belief.

Imagine all the practical uses for emptying churches.

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com).*